

Role Model

JRD Tata: When comes such another?

KSR Menon*

JRD Tata was neither born in India, nor did he die there. But he was an Indian extraordinaire whose life and times to this day remain an inspiration for millions in India and abroad.

JRD (Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata) as he was fondly called, was born on July 29, 1904 in Paris. He was the second child of Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata and his French wife, Suzanne Briere. Jamsetji Tata, the well known Indian industrialist of the time, was the first cousin of his father and it was his fortune he inherited years later.

After he became the head of the Tata Group of Companies, JRD took his family business to great heights. But he made his mark in something else, which was quite unusual for a businessman of the time and even now. He was acclaimed for succeeding in business while maintaining the highest ethical standards as he refused to bribe politicians or use unethical means to promote his family business. To a great extent, that ethos is followed by the Tata Group to this day.

JRD studied only up to matriculation and that remained a great regret in his life. After school, he joined the French Foreign Legion.

As fate would have it, he had to leave the army to join his family business in India. That saved his life as his Legion was wiped out during an expedition in Morocco the very next year.



He joined his family business in India as an unpaid apprentice in 1925 and went on to become the Chairman of Tata & Sons in 1938 at the young age of 34. After nearly 25 years when he left the Group, the number of businesses under him had grown from 14 to nearly 100.

Many awards and honours came his way during his lifetime. An avid aviator, he was the first pilot in India, his licence bearing the number 1. He was awarded India's highest civilian honour, the Bharat Ratna, in one of the rare instances when it was granted during a person's lifetime. When he died in 1993, the Parliament was adjourned in his memory, again a rare gesture towards a private citizen.

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A life extraordinaire and a role model

However, JRD stood out among the captains of Indian industry not because of the asset value of the enterprises he headed. He was a role model for Indian entrepreneurs because of his vision for India, and not just for the business empire he presided over. At a time when Indian capitalists were maligned for their profit motive, he was loved and lauded by the workers of his companies, for the initiatives which would have taken them years of struggle to achieve.

Good labour relations were always foremost in his mind as he believed in not only promoting business but also in investing in the thousands of his workers. Labour relations and labour laws were still in their infancy in 1956, but JRD launched a programme of closer 'employee association with management' giving the workers a say in the management. He introduced many fundamental measures for the welfare of workers that would be any communist's dream. He put in place for the first time the eight-hour working day, free medical aid, workers' provident fund and accident compensation schemes. Significantly these were subsequently accepted as statutory requirements in India. This great capitalist introduced a new practice wherein an employee was deemed to be at work the moment he leaves his home and until he returns, making the company financially liable for whatever happens to him during this period.

Corporate Social Responsibility may be a catchword now but decades ago, JRD recognised that and took several initiatives in that direction on his own. Tata Steel Township was chosen as a UN Global Compact City for its quality of life, better sanitation, excellent roads and other welfare schemes offered by Tata Steel.

It was JRD who launched the first airline in India called Tata Airline which in 1948 became Air India International and was nationalised in 1953. When he left Air India years later, it was one of the finest international airlines of the world. What happened afterwards to this great airline is now history.

JRD was a trustee in his family charity, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, from 1932 when it was founded. The Trust set up Asia's first cancer hospital, the Tata Memorial Centre for Cancer, Research and Treatment, Mumbai in 1941. It was he who founded the well known Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai and also the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, then one of the very few centres of excellence in research which was to help sow the seeds of India's atomic energy programme. His contributions covered a wide span as he also established the National Centre for Performing Arts.

JRD was a visionary who saw that the burgeoning Indian population was eating away the country's economic edifice. He took the lead along with other leading industrialists to set up the Population Foundation of India

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(PFI, formerly known as Family Planning Foundation) in 1970. He remained its founder Chairman till his death in 1993 in Switzerland at the age of 89. He strongly believed that population management was too sensitive and too important an issue to be left alone with the government and recognised the responsibility of the private sector on the issue.

Perhaps his only regret in life was that enough was not being done to manage the booming Indian population. Speaking at the annual General Meeting of the Family

Planning Foundation, he pointed out in 1991 quoting census figures that the population was growing beyond control. He warned that poverty fuelled largely by uncontrolled population growth was lowering the quality of life in India and increasing social tensions, wasting national energies. He criticised the bloated family planning programme of the government as ineffective and bureaucratic. Perhaps the greatest tribute anyone can make to JRD is by contributing to fulfil his visions of population management, which would see every Indian living in dignity.

Quotes from JRD Tata

Money is like manure. It stinks when you pile it; it grows when you spread it.

Never start with diffidence, Always start with confidence.

To be a leader, you have got to lead human beings with affection.

I never had any interest in making money. None of my decisions were influenced by whether it would bring me money or wealth.

Uncommon thinkers reuse what common thinkers refuse.

When you work, work as if everything depends on you. When you pray, pray as if everything depends on God.

Cleanliness is the Hallmark of perfect standards and the best quality inspector is the conscience.

Quality is first engineered; only then it is inspected.

Making steel may be compared to making a chappati (tortilla). To make a good chappati, even a golden pin will not work unless the dough is good.